

Away from the glitz and glamour of the high-profile commercial battles between big-name sports shoe brands, a much quieter footwear revolution has been taking place amidst the mud and rocks in the United Kingdom where fell runners run free.

# True grit

by Simon Roberts

**F**ell running in the UK is not a glamorous sport. Far removed from the commercial merry-go-round of a big city marathon, it tends to be dominated by wiry middle-aged men shambling around in string vests and indecently tight 1970s-style shorts.

It's hard to retain even a semblance of glamour when cresting the top of a Welsh mountain in gale-force winds and driving sleet, or surging waist-deep through a Peak District bog. It is a sport that prides itself on its purity and freedom from commercial influences. Indeed, an important part of the sport's historical

narrative emphasises precisely this tradition of suffering without specialist equipment. It typically revolves around the exploits of the sport's past legends, performing almost unbelievable feats of endurance in a pair of hobnailed boots sustained by jam sandwiches and the odd sip from a mountain stream.

## Off-road revolution

Spread the lens a little further afield, however, away from the grim moors of northern England and the windswept mountains of the Celtic nations, and it becomes clear that a revolution in off-road running equipment has taken place. A

*Not for the faint-hearted. Fell runner Peter Agnew picks his way across a tricky track in the Scottish Highlands.*

 Alistair Tye





*Ultralite X-Talon shoes from Inov-8 let runners feel every contour of the terrain.*

 Inov-8

new range of events – catering to a new kind of runner and requiring a more sophisticated approach to equipment – has emerged. Catch-all descriptors for such events are elusive, but they are often called trail races, and are usually associated with the drier, larger, more spectacular mountain scenery of the Alps, Pyrenees and North America.

And, perhaps because of this global focus, even the traditional world of British fell running has opened up to a range of new footwear in recent years. It's been a quiet revolution, but a significant one.

### One-man band

The revolution was gradual at first. The Lake District shepherds who surged up the hills in leather boots attracted wider attention from city dwellers keen to match their exploits, but those runners attracted to the challenges of running up mountains soon realised that something lighter and more specifically suited to steep slopes might help them run faster and in greater comfort. Enter Norman Walsh of Bolton, England (also the birthplace of Reebok), who designed the first custom-made fell running shoe in 1961 – specifically tweaked for the muddy, heather-clad slopes of the British hills.

Perhaps surprisingly, they found an international market. Scandinavians, for example, found them perfectly suited to their chosen sport of orienteering: the grip and sensitivity proving beneficial in the wet birch woods and difficult Nordic terrain. More recently they have become popular in the US and Australia and are, apparently, something of a fashion icon in Japan.

Walsh's shoes dominated the off-road running market for decades and their image perfectly chimed with that of the sport of fell running. Rather dour, determinedly functional, über-traditional: the no-frills design reflected their origins in the dark Pennine hills.

There was no going back to hobnailed boots or plimsolls. Instead, the bespoke fell running shoe revolved around an emphasis on grip and

traction. They are also much lower in profile than a typical road running shoe, with very little cushioning and a tight-fitting upper. The low-profile feels disconcerting to road runners at first, as they are used to more support, but it actually reduces the likelihood of a twisted or sprained ankle.

The principles established by Walsh remain with us, but even in the staid world of fell running their products were beginning to look a little tired by the turn of the new millennium.

### In with the new

Inov-8, another company born in the hills of northern England, exploited the rather obvious gap in the market by introducing a range of sleek, even stylish, off-road running shoes. Initially going for the traditional Walsh market, its Mudroc and Mudclaw models introduced ever more aggressive soles, with deep spikes allowing for fast downhill plunges. As most British fell races are won on the descents, they quickly gathered an enthusiastic following.

New manufacturing techniques were introduced by the company, with technical-sounding trademarks attempting to encapsulate the difference between its products and those that had gone before. The 'Metashank' midsole, for example, used on many of its more aggressive models, is supposed to align behind the metatarsals to give greater forefoot flexibility. What this means in practice is that the runner has a better level of control when contouring steep hillsides.

As a result, the majority of fell runners in the UK have switched to Inov-8 in recent years. Simon Edwards, a leading Welsh fell runner, is typical: "I used to swear by Walsh shoes. I believed them to be the best fell shoe by far. However, during a race around five years ago I had an epiphany. I was attempting, and failing, to navigate steep, wet rock. The runners I was with were struggling but I was suffering by far the worst. After the race I saw them all wearing Inov-8 shoes.

"I immediately swapped and never looked back. In hindsight I reckon the Walsh format is

unsuitable for “heavier” runners – I’m 73kg, for example. They’re too narrow which causes stability issues; and the trademark pyramid-style studs offer a very low surface area making them poor for running on expanses of flat rock. In contrast Inov-8 offered, and more so now, a range of shoes for differing terrains, runners’ weights and so on. This level of customisation and choice has helped a great many runners – me included.”

### Alpine air

The company quickly diversified its output, and, like Walsh, began to reach beyond the relatively limited world of British fell running to appeal to an international audience of off-road runners. A range of trail shoes was introduced, with more cushioning for the feet, better suited to the drier, rockier tracks that typify Alpine racing. Races in the Alps also tend to be uphill only, so there is little point in investing in highly aggressive uncushioned shoes like the Mudclaw. Instead, models like the Roclite and more recent Terraflly gained an international following.

The Terraflly, in particular, is a more versatile shoe, which works very well on the sorts of trail running common in parts of the Alps and North America. While you wouldn’t want to be careering down a muddy hill in the Lake District in them, they are superbly adapted to a mix of road, trail and gravel.

Inov-8 markets the Terraflly as a ‘hybrid’ shoe, a newish concept encompassing training and events that use a mixture of tarmac roads and trail. Indeed, Inov-8 has recently launched a range of road shoes that takes a similarly radical approach to conventional thinking. These were paralleled by the introduction of the distinctive Bare Grip 200, designed for the hills as an almost skeletal, minimalist shoe that taps into the ‘barefoot running’ zeitgeist.

The barefoot running ethos expounded by Inov-8 recently reached a much wider audience with the publication of Christopher McDougall’s *Born to Run* – which outlines the performances of Mexico’s Tarahumara tribe and argues that western runners’ dependence on spongy, cushioned footwear makes them more, not less, prone to injury. Inov-8’s designs typically have no midsole, which it claims means energy is transferred directly through the shoe.

### The appeal of lightness

These shoes are also, of course, very light. Indeed, the ultra-lite X-Talon 190 (as in 190 grammes) is designed for speed and so inevitably makes some trade-offs with durability. But this extreme lightness is highly appealing to fell runners, for whom every gram matters when climbing steep hills.

Fell runner and race organiser Peter Agnew is



*Inov-8 has won a strong following among fell runners after years of dominance by specialty footwear brand Walsh. Some durability issues have come to light.*

 Alistair Tye

typical of many in his devotion to this particular model of shoe, which has gained a remarkably loyal following given its relatively recent launch: “I am now on my third pair of X-Talons and I am not minded to buy anything else. In fact, when I did, purchasing a pair of Mudroc 270s because I was seduced by the chunky sole, I found them floppy - akin to strapping a Cornish pasty [pie] to my feet. The Mudrocs were also terrible when traversing, sliding around the foot, even when tightened.

“I love the fact that the X-Talons let you feel each rugosity [ridge or crease], even when descending at speed. This isn’t uncomfortable, as it just amplifies the sense of security you need to experience when flying downhill. Since there is so little to the shoe, there is very little to rub and I can categorically say that I have never had a blister when wearing them. A good fell shoe should feel the same when dry or saturated and this is the case with the X-Talons, which shed water instantly.”

Less successful are the boot versions of these very light shoes. They give some ankle protection, but the lightness versus durability trade-off is somewhat less successful. A few days in the Scottish Highlands earlier this year, for instance, saw mine develop large holes on both insteps.

### Price to pay

These trade-offs are an inevitable byproduct of this sort of innovation, and are well illustrated by the differences between Inov-8’s Mudclaws and X-Talons. The Mudclaws have a highly aggressive sole, with long studs that provide tremendous stability and confidence and are perfectly suited to a steep British fell race. But the

price to be paid for this is increased weight. The X-Talons are far lighter, but the short studs can make descending difficult in wet and muddy conditions.

Jez Brown is a fell runner who regularly wins races in Wales and north-west England. He has recently switched from Walsh, to adidas Swoop, to Innov8, and has found Mudclaws most suitable to his requirements: "I'm one of those 'careful with money' people and had been put off by the price of Inov-8s, but after sending back a pair of Walsh trail shoes after only three months' use due to a hole developing in the toe area, then the same happening with a pair of adidas fell shoes, I took the plunge and got some Mudclaws. I must admit, I can't believe I waited three years and I wish I had tried them sooner. I found within a few days that they provided a really comfortable fit and, even though they're heavier than some of the company's other products, I reckon they are much lighter than other fell shoes I have worn."

There are some dissenting voices among the off-road running community. Significant numbers remain loyal to Walsh and other brands, while several runners have specific criticisms of the otherwise lauded Inov-8 products.

Take Neil Parry, a regular race winner with two decades of experience, for instance: "I think Inov-8 overtook Walsh due to the technological advances in the shoes and the various models for various types of running. From my experience of Inov-8 I have found that in general they are good. They have a good fit and feel comfortable. I like the fact that you can go on the website and pick the shoes specifically for the terrain and type of running you are looking to do, but I've been disappointed with my latest pair of Mudclaws. The heel of one of the shoes

has fallen apart and the uppers have come away from the soles, and I know that others have had similar problems."

### Imelda Marcos syndrome

As a consequence of all this innovation, many off-road runners now have Imelda Marcos syndrome: a pair of shoes for every possible eventuality. This, as much as anything, illustrates the success of Inov-8. They have persuaded fell runners to switch from the traditional offering, not through marketing but by the real advantages tailored footwear can offer. The races may still retain their determinedly un-commercial air, they may still cost £3 to enter with a cake and pint of ale included in the price, but the days of an old pair of flapping plimsolls, or even one all-purpose pair of Walsh shoes, have gone.

At a recent short fell race in north-east Wales, it was possible to make an assessment of the shoe choices. Most common, by some margin, were Inov-8 X-Talons, an illustration that runners generally opt for lightness over durability. This model was followed by its Mudclaw, Mudroc and Bare-grip models. Then came Walsh, followed by adidas Swoop, and a few mavericks in Salomon shoes, or Running Bear products (a small Cheshire-based company). At a longer race, the 20-kilometre Foel Fras race in Snowdonia, which takes in four peaks and 1,500 metres of climbing, more people had opted for the durable Walsh footwear, or Mudclaws, but there were still significant numbers in ultra-light designs. That encapsulates the current approach: it is very hard to move from light to heavy no matter what the circumstances. 

*Simon Roberts is a journalist and academic, and also Welsh fell running champion in the veteran category for 2011.*

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